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ABSTRACT

The co-directors of the 1998 Annual Symposium for Language Renewal and Revitalization describe how they came up with a focus and presenters for the symposium. They began by discussing their concern over the loss of indigenous languages and cultures, then decided to honor tribal elders by choosing one to represent them all as the symposium's keynote speaker. They selected a Yavapai man who was very articulate and brought with him a wealth of experience and wisdom. Another topic they discussed while planning the conference was the concept of highlighting a cultural group. They decided to recognize people from Hawaii at the conference and worked with the Department of Hawaiian and Indo-Pacific Languages at the University of Hawaii to come up with speakers, dancers, and chanters. The program booklet emphasized Hawaiian culture and also included maps, famous quotations, and cultural information from other indigenous groups. (SM)

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Honoring the Elders

Evangeline Parsons Yazzie, Robert N. St. Clair

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Before the fifth Annual Symposium for Language Renewal and Revitalization held in 1998 at the University of Louisville we met in the lobby of the conference center at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff to discuss the focus of the next conference at the University of Louisville. One of the first topics to emerge was our joint concern for the loss of indigenous languages and cultures. We began the discussion in a global way. We mentioned various tribes and the loss of their own languages and cultures. Very quickly, the abstract was made real. Evangeline began to mention many elders that she personally knew. Each had come to the end of their life and with their passing, she personally experienced the loss of their language and culture. These were not just elders; they were the keepers of cultural traditions; they were the last speakers of their languages. When they left this earth to join the spirit world, they left no one behind to carry on the tradition.

The discussion regarding the loss of the elders was not a mere commentary on the past. It was a lengthy and prolonged discussion of individuals that Evangeline Parsons-Yazzie had known for many years. We both had personal experiences to share regarding the elders, but the depth of this experience as articulated by Evangeline was profound. As she spoke, our voices lowered. It was as if we were attending the funerals of each and every one of those that we have known. Many times, there were long moments of silence. There are times when words cannot even begin to capture the depths of our feelings and experiences. As we continued to discuss this area of mutual concern, our voices cracked and our eyes began to water. Although the sun beautifully articulated the landscape that surrounded the campus of the university, we did not notice it. Although there were many people around us discussing various aspects of the conference, we did not see them. We were both encapsulated in a cone of silence, moments of heaviness, and the events that we discussed were emotionally difficult. It remained with us not only during the remainder of that day, but for months after.

How do we honor the elders? How do we say thank you for just being the wonderful person that you are? How do we recognize that those who are still with us are our living libraries and language teachers? How do we say that we are ashamed for not doing something about making them the centers of our lives? As we discussed these possibilities, Evangeline came up with the brilliant idea that we would choose one of the elders as a representative of all of them. We would choose a living representative of those who have gone beyond. She mentioned the name of Ted Vaughn, a Yavapai. We chose him as our keynote speaker. His presence at the conference was impressive. Ted Vaughn is very articulate. He brought with him a wealth of experience and years of wisdom. He became our archetype for the honoring of the elders. We all had the opportunity to meet with Ted during the conference. He was among us during the various

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meals, during coffee breaks, and during the various conference papers. We are grateful to Ted for his participation in our conference.

When we closed the conference in Louisville, Evangeline openly shared her vision of honoring the elders. She introduced Ted Vaughn again and asked those in the audience to bring forth an elder and to honor that person. The moment was magical. There they were, young and old, standing together. We had created our own ceremony. We found a way to say thank you and we all shared in that experience. We showed that we loved our elders by embracing them and tightly holding on to them on stage. The heavy moments of silence that we experienced in Flagstaff during the planning stage emerged into new moments of happiness. The process was a healing unto itself. We only ask that we continue to honor the elders during our annual meetings. We ask that what was a new ceremony will become an annual ritual.

The Hawaiians are coming

Another topic that we discussed during the planning stages of our conference was the concept of highlighting a cultural group. The rationale behind this was to share the depth of contributions made by that group. We were not sure just what group that would be. After a few months, Robert St. Clair asked Evangeline Parsons-Yazzie if he could bring in the Hawaiians as the cultural group to recognize at the conference. She concurred and he began the process of working with the past participants from Hawaii to make it a reality. There are some very personal reasons for his participation in this event. St. Clair was born and raised in Hawaii. His native language is Portuguese, but he learned many of the languages in his neighborhood while growing up there. He learned English by age five and spoke with his childhood neighbors in Hawaiian, Japanese, and Hawaiian Creole. He personally knew of the rich traditions that emanated from Polynesia. He knew of the *Ka Huna* tradition, the chants, the hula dance, and the richness of the language.

The members of the Department of Hawaiian and Indo-Pacific Languages at the University of Hawaii were very helpful in introducing its language and culture to the Louisville conference. Emily Hawkins was our main contact. She arranged for the dances and chants that we all enjoyed at the closing session of the conference. We wanted to not only highlight Hawaii, but Polynesia and we were fortunate to have papers from Timoti Karetu of New Zealand and Mary Jane Fox of Yap.

Since many did not know the Hawaiians, we decided to do something very different with the program booklet. We included cultural information throughout the booklet. We included Hawaiian tapa motifs in our banners; we provided cultural information on the islands of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia; we introduced our participants to the meanings behind common Hawaiian names; we included maps of various Polynesian locales so that one could visualize just where Hawaii, New Zealand, and the Marshall Islands are located; we provided the names of the lunar calendar; and we explained the meaning of the *kumulipo*, the Hawaiian chant. To balance this focus on the Polynesians, we also included

maps, cultural information, and famous quotations from other indigenous groups. We hope that from time to time, our conference will continue to highlight a group from among themselves.

Concluding remarks

The 1998 conference was the embodiment of several ideas as with the other conferences held in this series of annual indigenous language conferences started in 1994. One was the honoring of the elders and the other was the foregrounding of the Hawaiians. We were honored to be given the privilege of being co-directors of this conference. With you, we all experienced the moment that was. We know that being co-directors of a conference gives one the impression that we did all of the work. We had lots of help. Jon Reyhner played a major role in guiding us. So did Gina Cantoni. They are the avatars, our conference grandparents. We also thank Ted Vaughn for participating in our quest of honoring the elders. We had much help. We also worked closely with Barbara Burnaby during the operating stage of the conference as she was preparing for her own conference in Toronto, Canada. In the contemporary culture of the business world, there is the illusion of the self-made person. This is just an illusion. For every successful person, there are layers of assistance, people in the background who are vitally important in the creation of events. We know who these people are and we thank them for their help. Many of these people can be found at our own institutions, the University of Louisville and Northern Arizona University. Many are personal friends and relatives. Many of them are our colleagues and our own students. We thank you all. We are not alone. Everything that we do, we do with others and we do them because of others. We all share in the making of these events.

Dos and Don'ts in Language Teaching

- Make opportunities for learner to talk.
- Expect them to talk or respond to you (WAIT).
- Do not laugh at their attempts. Be serious.
- Shape and Expand their responses to be more adult-like.

Shaping

- Ask questions as if to confirm understanding of what learner has just said. Learner will repeat the 'improved' statement as if it was his/her own.
- A language is learned by speaking it.
- Adult may just say the phrase correctly.
- Learner may repeat once or twice.
- With continued 'shaping' language becomes more and more adult-like.
- Commands and Directions are okay.

Expanding

- Expand words or short phrases into more complete sentences.
- Try to get learners to use phrases/sentences **WITH VERBS**. (If s/he doesn't use a verb, supply one for her/him. Do this by asking a confirmation-type question to which a response is made with a longer answer.)
- Be matter of fact. Do not make a big deal out of it.

We have to transfer language behavior that often seems to come naturally in parent/child interaction into teacher/child interaction.

- Talk to learners only in Navajo.
- Expect a response in Navajo.
- Teach them what to say if they don't understand.
- Do not punish them if they should not understand.
- Set up situations where learners talk to the teacher and other learners in Navajo.
- Set up situations where learners ask questions to the teacher and other learners in Navajo.

ABOVE ALL, BE PATIENT!!!

From: Navajo Nation Language Project, Division of Diné Education. (2003). *Directory of secondary Navajo language programs* (Funded by ANA Grant No. 90NL0125, NNLP 97/08/27), Inside front cover.

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